

# Digging for the King? Early excavations in the Bay of Naples

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Throughout the eighteenth century, excavations at the sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the kingdom of Naples in Southern Italy unearthed a mass of ancient artefacts: paintings, sculptures, bronzes, pots and pans, instruments and implements that had been buried for hundreds of years since the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Traveller after traveller who visited Naples during what was the height of the grand tour, went into rhetorical overdrive, describing the disinterred antiquities as a collection par excellence; unrivalled by any other collection of its type in the world; the exclusive property of the King of the Two Sicilies, Charles III. Many travellers' accounts from this period relate how the town of Herculaneum was rediscovered quite by accident, when workmen digging a well fell into the auditorium of the theatre. Once the site had been identified as that of Herculaneum nothing was left to chance or looters. The entire project of excavating, collecting, exhibiting and publishing the finds initially from Herculaneum and later from Pompeii too was orchestrated by the Neapolitan monarch. The recovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum may be seen as a model for the classical tradition – since, while the artefacts were indisputably ancient, their treatment tells as much about the eighteenth-century as about Roman antiquity.

## Inventing archaeology: collecting and contextualising

When we think about the excavation of the sites, we have to remember that what we understand by archaeology – the systematic excavation and scientific documentation of a site – had yet to be invented in the eighteenth century. Consequently, early attempts at excavation were based on trial and error. In the absence of a professional archaeologist to lead the excavations, Charles III looked to the most obvious candidates in his court – the military engineers Rocque Joachin Alcubierre and his principal assistant, Karl Weber. Their experience of surveying and mapping the land above ground was applied to the layers of earth below. It was dangerous and dirty work; the temporary tunnels they had constructed were liable to collapse, in addition to being deprived of light and air. The hazardous working conditions were not helped by conflict between the director and his assistant. Alcubierre's policy was to exhaust the sites of their surviving masterpieces – to exhume all the artefacts that were destined for the royal collection and the King's enjoyment. But Weber wanted to excavate the sites more systematically, in order to appreciate and record the architectural and domestic contexts in which the artefacts were found. Their different working methods led to endless fighting and political manoeuvring. Karl Weber's 1758 large plan of the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum would form the basis two centuries later for J. Paul Getty's reconstruction of the Villa to house his collections at Malibu. In this plan, Weber drew the architectural structure of the villa with its series of interconnecting tunnels. Weber's annotations at the top and bottom of the plan provide a scale and also a numerical and alphabetical key to locate the find spots of individual artefacts on the plan. Artefacts from other areas of the sites were removed prior to such careful documentation to be delivered to the King in his palace at nearby Portici, where he inspected his new-found treasures each day.

## Destruction and display: controlling the finds

The King's control of his ancient collection was reflected in many ways. As part of his desire for artistic masterpieces, the painted wall schemes that characterise the interiors of the houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum and cover the entire space from ceiling to floor, were sliced apart to produce multiple paintings. Duplicates were forbidden, which resulted in paintings with repeated images actually being destroyed. Having been fragmented into individual paintings and taken out of context, the paintings continued to be treated in the manner of eighteenth-century canvas paintings rather than ancient plaster wall schemes when they were framed with wood and varnished. Just as archaeology had yet to be invented, so the same was true for conservation in the eighteenth century. The techniques adopted to preserve the colours actually turned out to do more damage than preservation when the gum painted on resulted in the plaster cracking and falling off.

In the museum of the royal palace at Portici, the artefacts were displayed in great suites of exhibition galleries. A curator, Camillo Paderni, was appointed to oversee the collection and it was to him that applications were made for access. You could not simply turn up, pay your entrance fee and visit the galleries. Many foreign tourists in Naples approached their native ambassadors in order to see the collection. British visitors often approached their envoy in Naples, Sir William Hamilton, who was himself a collector of ancient Greek (then called 'Etruscan') vases and whose first collection was bought for the British Museum. Hamilton could get visitors into the galleries, but even he did not have sufficient diplomatic clout to enable them to take notes or make drawings of the artefacts in front of them. It was the same at the sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii which were policed by guards who ensured that not even a pencil appeared without special approval. There were penalties for contravening these restrictions – fines or even imprisonment. These extreme measures were adopted as a means of effectively 'patenting' the finds for the exclusive use of King Charles III. He wanted to protect his collection because he was responsible for its publication, in a series of eight luxury volumes entitled *The Antiquities of Herculaneum* (*Le Antichità di Ercolano*). The King founded a learned society, whose academic members were known as the Accademia Ercolanese, to edit the volumes published between 1757 and 1792. The ancient artefacts were published typologically, that is, according to their material classifications. Volumes I to IV were devoted to ancient paintings, volumes V (1767) and VI (1771) to bronzes, volume VII (1779) to additional paintings, and finally volume VIII (1792), to lamps and candelabra. Each artefact was engraved and its black and white image was accompanied by a text in Italian explaining the piece with references to Classical sources – a scholarly and lavish publication.

## Competing for library space

The volumes of the *Antichità di Ercolano* were pretty weighty tomes – difficult to read and physically huge – the complete set of eight would make their presence felt in any library. But their

circulation was to only a select and exclusive group. To get a copy of the first volume, you had to be listed on the King's exclusive mailing list. The early volumes were not for public sale, but were distributed by him as gifts of royal favour. There was no guarantee of completing the set of eight, never mind getting on the King's hit list. This was the situation until 1773, when the illicit publication of rival volumes made a mockery of the King's attempts at patenting and controlling the material.

A volume published by two Frenchmen, an engraver and an architect, was precisely the type of publication the Neapolitan authorities hoped to suppress. Charles-Nicolas Cochin and Jérôme-Charles Bellicard's *Observations upon the Antiquities of the town of Herculaneum* (London, 1753), included engravings of artefacts from Herculaneum, which, because of the royal ban on note-taking, the authors were forced to draw from memory. One of their engravings depicts a large painting of the hero Theseus having killed the minotaur. When Camillo Paderni described this painting, it was in highly complimentary terms. For him, the figure of Theseus is like a statue of Antinous, boyfriend of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, which stood in the Vatican Museum in Rome. The composition he pronounces worthy of the most famous of Italian Renaissance artists, Raphael. Naturally, we cannot take Paderni's critique at face value, since, as curator of the Royal collection, he had to pay lip service to the collection. Not everyone shared his view. Cochin and Bellicard found the painting unfinished and more like a sketch or an example of theatrical scenery. Their own sketch of the painting which, let us not forget, was taken from memory, can also be contrasted with the engraving reproduced in the official royal publication – *Le Antichità di Ercolano*. This reproduction is far from sketchy; in fact, with the exception of two areas of loss, the figures appear as if in pristine condition.

### **From private to public**

Since the rediscovery of the sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the eighteenth century and right up to present date, they and their contents have repeatedly been referred to as preserved in amber or untouched by time. The historical period of the eighteenth century is vital in understanding their post-classical history. Not only was this when they were rediscovered, but it was also a period of renewed interest in the past and concern for how to process and display it. These were the early days of hazardous excavation and royal control; a period in which the pursuit of masterpieces led to restricted access and lavish publication. The artefacts we have been discussing are now in Archaeological Museum in Naples; the sites are publicly accessible. But we would do well to remember that this has not always been the case.

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